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Prague. Sermon in Behalf of the Polish Exiles.
1834

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DR. SPRAGUE'S SERMON

IN BEHALF OF

THE POLISH EXILES.

A
SERMON

PREACHED

IN THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ALBANY,

SABBATH EVENING, MAY 11, 1834.

**AND REPEATED, BY SPECIAL REQUEST, ON THE ENSUING TUESDAY EVENING, IN
THE SECOND REFORMED DUTCH CHURCH,**

IN BEHALF OF THE

POLISH EXILES

LATELY ARRIVED IN THIS COUNTRY.

By WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

MINISTER OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

ALBANY:
PRINTED BY PACKARD AND VAN BENTHUYSEN.
.....
1834.

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J. C. Lowell

Whatever profits may arise from the sale of this discourse, will be applied for
the relief of the Polish exiles.

TO
ERASTUS CORNING, Esq.

Mayor of the city of Albany,

THIS DISCOURSE,

PREACHED IN BEHALF OF AN OBJECT TO WHICH HE HAS MOST GENEROUSLY LENT HIS AID,

IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED,

AS AN EXPRESSION OF REGARD,

BY HIS SINCERE FRIEND,

W. B. S.

Albany, May 15, 1834.



SERMON.

HEBREWS, XIII. 3.

Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them, and them which suffer adversity as being yourselves also in the body.

The apostle commences this chapter by exhorting the Hebrew christians to the general duty of brotherly love. In the passage just read, he reminds them particularly of their obligations to administer, according to their ability, to the relief of those oppressed brethren whose attachment to the christian faith had subjected them to persecution and imprisonment; and, as an argument for the discharge of this duty, he alludes to the consideration that they and their afflicted brethren possessed a common nature, and were alike subject to human calamity. You will, I think, readily perceive that the passage suggests a train of thought not inappropriate to the present occasion.

I. Let us contemplate, for a moment, the **DUTY** which the text enjoins: it is charity to the wretched and necessitous.

In respect to the properties of christian charity, I remark, in the first place, that it is *active*. There

is a kind of sentimental benevolence, whose praises have often been celebrated by infidel philosophy, which knows no other element than the field of listless contemplation. She talks much of the delightful emotions of sympathy, and is fruitful in speculations concerning the relief of human wo; but her pretensions are miserably hollow and false. You will never see her wandering into the retreats of poverty, or descending into the dungeon of the criminal, or ministering around the couch of the dying. She exhausts her zeal in clamoring about what others *ought* to do, or what she *would* do, but you ask in vain for the record of what she *has* done. "Be ye warmed and be ye clothed," is the salutation with which she greets the children of want; while she turns coldly away from their miseries and refuses to lift a hand for their relief.

Not so with that heaven-born charity which breathes in the gospel. *She* scatters blessings wherever she moves. She is indeed no friend to ostentatious parade; and instead of sounding a trumpet to let you know when she is out upon errands of mercy, she moves noiseless as the falling dew, and you can trace her only by the blessings which precede her march and follow in her train. But instead of merely greeting the hungry and naked with smiles and good wishes, she administers the more substantial relief of food and raiment. Instead of bidding the sufferer dry up his tears because they are unphilosophical and useless, she wipes them away with her own kind hand, and points upward, through this pathway of tribulation,

to the christian mourner's everlasting home. *Her* tears were made for better purposes than to be shed over a novel: *her* heart beats to other scenes of woe than the wild and feverish dreams of imagination.

Several of the infidel philosophers of the last century, have speculated finely on the subject of philanthropy, and have thrown out occasional sentiments from which it might be inferred that they were among the most benevolent of men. But who that has any knowledge of their history does not know that their professions were a cover to the basest selfishness and the most iron-hearted misanthropy? All that they had to do with human woe was done in their closets: they had neither the courage nor the disposition to go out into the world and encounter it in living reality. Even the common sympathies of nature were to a great extent congealed under the chilling influence of the systems they embraced. Yes, with the sweet sounds of charity upon their lips, as if they were good angels directly from Heaven, they could be summoning to their aid the very artillery of the pit to prosecute a malignant warfare upon human happiness: they could blast the best hopes of their fellow men, and smile when the work was done; they could listen to the knell of death amid the scenes of a revolution, every line of whose history is written in blood, and find it sweet music to their ears. Call not these men benevolent: they were imbued with the very spirit of the world below; and their names stand out, and will always stand out, with appalling prominence, on the dark record of human malignity.

But from these examples of pretended philanthropy, turn, for a moment, to some of the real and bright achievements of christian charity. Let me mention here a name which will not dishonor the sacredness of the place in which I stand;—I mean the illustrious name of Howard; a name which every child has learned to identify with all that is generous, and disinterested, and holy, in man, and which will lose none of its lustre so long as there remains a record of the most exalted and heroic virtue. Was it enough for that apostle of benevolence to speculate on human misery, and to greet the children of sorrow with a complacent look, or a kind salutation? No; there was in his bosom the sanctified spirit of philanthropic action; a spirit that made him regard the world as his field, because he saw that human suffering was every where; a spirit that made him forget the fatigue of incessant exertion, the damps of the prisoner's cell, the loathsomeness of the sick man's couch, and even the atmosphere impregnated with death. Howard, thrice honored be the venerable name! It shall go down through successive generations with accumulating glory; it shall be pronounced with reverence in the prison and the lazaretto; and while it shall shine out on the catalogue of the ransomed in the Lamb's book of life, it shall live in the grateful remembrances and benedictions of thousands through their whole eternity!

It is another property of christian charity that it is *enlightened*. It recognises man as a being of intellect; and requires the exercise of reflection and

judgment. An indiscriminate charity could scarcely be considered a virtue ; and instead of contributing to the good of those towards whom it might be directed, it would often operate to their injury. You perceive, at once, that propriety would dictate a very different course in respect to an individual who should ask your aid in consequence of having been reduced to want by the righteous providence of God, and whose character was a pledge that your alms would not be misapplied, and another individual who should present himself at your door staggering under the influence of intoxication, and begging for money with a manifest intention to squander it on his beastly appetite. What would be charity in the one case, would be no better than cruelty in the other. If then you would be truly charitable, you must bring judgment to your aid, that you may determine which are the really deserving objects : otherwise your alms may be instrumental of evil, where you really design to accomplish good.

In this world where misery exists in so many forms, there must always be a wide field for the exercise of christian philanthropy. Where there is so much ignorance to be enlightened, so much superstition to be removed, so much sorrow to be relieved, the true philanthropist can never be at loss for objects on which to fasten his charitable regards. At the same time, the very number and variety of the objects that present themselves, may sometimes serve to embarrass him in his selection. But let him choose under the influence of judgment rather

than feeling, taking counsel of an enlightened conscience, and seeking direction from the Father of lights, and he will be in little danger of committing an error.

I remark, once more, that christian charity is controlled in its operations by *a regard to the will of God*. There is a chord in almost every human bosom which vibrates to the touch of sorrow. A person possessing the common feelings of humanity cannot witness scenes of deep distress without some emotions of sympathy ; and where the heart is peculiarly alive to the sufferings of others, such emotions will sometimes rise so high as to be well nigh overwhelming. It is, no doubt, to this feature of our original constitution that we are to attribute many of those noble and generous deeds which awaken our gratitude and admiration, and which are often spoken of in the world as, of course, evidencing a title to immortal glory. But much as we may admire a naturally benevolent and sympathetic spirit, it were a wretched perversion of God's truth to say that the exercise of such a spirit, while unsanctified by the Holy Ghost, could constitute, in the eye of Heaven, acceptable charity. In a gust of natural feeling, you may give all your goods to feed the poor, and this act may place you high on the list of earthly benefactors ; and yet, if it be not done from a regard to the will of God, it can never turn to your account as an act of genuine christian philanthropy. Not that the christian, in the exercise of his charity, may not feel all the enthusiasm of a naturally benevolent heart, and be under the

influence of the kindest feelings that belong to human nature ; but then, in addition to this, he regards the authority of God as supreme ; and the consideration which crowns all the rest, is a desire to glorify God by obeying his commandments.

II. Having thus presented before you the duty enjoined in the text, let me now, secondly, direct your thoughts, for a moment, to the ARGUMENT by which the apostle enforces it. It is drawn from the fact that we are all partakers of a common nature ; members of the same great family. "Remember * * * them that suffer adversity, *as being yourselves also in the body.*"

The fact that we are in the body, and inhabitants of this world of sorrow, is a sufficient reason why we should always live in expectation of adversity. Be it that you have hitherto always been prospered—yet you must have kept your eyes closed on the experience of your fellow men, and the common course of the world, not to be convinced that you are liable, any moment, to see your prosperity come to an end. Be it that you are rich—yet can you observe how easily the riches of others have taken to themselves wings, without being compelled to feel that all you have may soon be gone ? Possibly you may have never had occasion for human sympathy on account of the loss of near friends ; and yet can you look out upon the mourning processions that daily pass through our streets, without realizing that you are constantly liable to the sorrows of bereavement ? Perhaps you have gloried in an iron constitution ; and in the dreams of your

self-confidence, you may have sometimes flattered yourself that the shocks of a century would leave it unimpaired ; but you surely can not *repose* in any such delusions, when you see how the strength of the giant is but as tow, before the mighty hand of disease. Suppose then—and in making the supposition, I surely impose no great tax upon your credulity—suppose, a little while hence, you should be the subject of poverty, or sickness, or bereavement, or all of them united, what treatment would you desire, what might you reasonably expect, from those around you ? Would it not be a balm to your feelings, to see some benefactor stepping forward to aid you in your poverty ; some sympathizing friend to divide with you your burden of sorrow ; some generous physician, to minister around your sick bed, even though he knew that you were too poor to reward him for his services ? “ Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

In a world abounding with changes like the present, no man can say that his prosperity will last for an hour ; or that the person who is now the object of his charity may not soon be administering charity to him. The best security you can have against being neglected or forsaken in the day of adversity, is to show yourself always the friend of suffering humanity. Rarely indeed is the truly charitable man ever left to want ; and the influence of his good deeds extends even to his children ; just as the iniquities of parents are often, in a thousand ways, visited upon their offspring. Did you ever have an

application for charity from one whose father or whose mother had been distinguished in the walks of active benevolence? Then I know you did not refuse it; for there was something in your heart that told you that that son or daughter must be blessed for the parent's sake.

But suppose you were certain that you should never need the sympathy or the charity of others, it would still be your duty to extend your sympathy and charity to them, because you have a common nature with them, and they are your brethren. They may have their lot cast in some part of the world to which you never have had, and never will have, access; the wide ocean may roll between you and them; they may speak a language which you can not understand, and may have grown up under influences to which you are a stranger; and yet they and you are children of the same Father, partakers of the same nature, candidates for the same immortality, and capable alike of enjoying the blessings of this life and of another. Suppose then they send to you the story of their sorrows and their wants, could you, without forgetting the relationship you sustain to them, withhold the relief that was within your power? Suppose they should actually come with the sad tale of their misfortunes upon their lips; or suppose they should gather around you in all their wretchedness, and let you learn from their scars, and their rags, that they had been first in battle, and then in captivity, and had lost every thing but the breath of life;—if, under such cir-

cumstances, you should turn a deaf ear, would not conscience lift up her voice to charge you with an offence against nature? Would you dare look up to Heaven and call God your Father, after having been thus inattentive to the wants of some of his children?

* In passing to the particular object of our meeting this evening, it is due to myself to say that I appear before you under the disadvantage of the most hurried preparation; the only time that I have been able to allot to it having been the intervals between our public services during the day. But when I heard the case stated this morning by the benevolent individual† who has taken the lead in this philanthropic enterprize, when I perceived that he was enlisted with a generous enthusiasm in behalf of those, the very recital of whose sufferings is enough to make the ear tingle and the blood curdle, I could not refuse to become a co-worker with him in this labor of love; and to give you an opportunity to assemble in the house of God to-night, to testify by your alms that you know how to “remember them that suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.”

I shall simply state a few facts which have been furnished me, as the ground on which, in the name of suffering humanity, in the venerable name of Christianity herself, I am about to solicit your charities.

Of the recent history of the fortunes, or rather the misfortunes, of Poland, it is unnecessary that I

* This paragraph was omitted, and the succeeding one modified, in the delivery of the discourse the second time.

should speak. It is fresh in the memories of all of you, how manfully she struggled to resist the oppressor ; how her heart's blood flowed out like water in the righteous cause of her own freedom ; and how, at length, the protracted conflict terminated in her being ground to the dust. We who had ourselves known what it was to be oppressed, and what it was to have been set free, partly by the blessing of God on the heroic efforts of some of this very nation, kept our eye fixed with intense solicitude on that eventful struggle, until the dying groan of Polish liberty reached our ears : and I appeal to your own recollection, whether it was not as if the cold air of death were sweeping over our own free institutions, when we heard it announced that the oppressor of that noble people had triumphed ? In the providence of God more than two hundred of that very people have recently alighted on our shores ; a small part of this number have come to our city ; they are with us here to-night ; and I avail myself of their entire ignorance of our language to tell you, in few words, the story of their misfortunes, without running the hazard of wounding their extreme delicacy. These men then, who are before you, were engaged in fighting the battles of their country for nearly three years ; and being overpowered by hordes of Russians, they took temporary refuge in a province (formerly a portion of their own soil) of the Austrian dominions ; and having suffered every thing but death, they were actually chained like felons, and thus thrown into carts, and transported thence nearly eight hundred miles

to an Austrian seaport; and then they were permitted to choose between Siberia and America as their place of destination; though, in either case, they must leave parents, wives, children, to the mercy of Russian bayonets. They chose America; and hither they have come in all their want and wretchedness; and their presence this evening must, I am sure, call into exercise your liveliest sympathies. Let it be remembered that they are not vulgar and uneducated men, who were born to the prospect of a life of penury: on the contrary, they are men of considerable intellectual culture, of high and honorable feelings, and some of them are connected with families of rank, and have been accustomed to move in circles of distinction. I am assured by the gentleman already alluded to, that the idea of asking charity exceedingly revolts their feelings, notwithstanding the iron pressure of their necessities; and that what they most of all desire is, that they may be furnished with some employment, no matter how humble it may be, by means of which they may provide for their own subsistence.* They come to find a refuge among us from the bloody horrors of a most disastrous revolution; and they come, of course, in all the want and wretchedness of exiles; but they bring with them a spirit of subordination and industry, and a determination to render themselves worthy and useful citizens.


* It will be gratifying to those who are interested for the welfare of these unfortunate men, to know that, since the delivery of this discourse, the whole number who came to this city the last week, amounting to twenty-six, have had places provided for them, in which they are likely to be comfortable and useful.

I have told you the story of the sufferings of these men just as it has been related to me ; and of the truth of it there is not the shadow of reason to doubt. But I am persuaded that what you have now heard would seem frigid and uninteresting, compared with the heart rending detail which *they* would give, if they were able to speak for themselves: and I can imagine that if what has been passing in *their* minds, while I have been speaking, could, by any means, be communicated to *our own*, we should be eager to dismiss from our thoughts such scenes of blood and woe as would rise up before us. I can imagine that while I have been spreading their case before you, they have been going back to the joys of other days ; to the comforts of a peaceful domestic fireside ; to the cheerful interchange of kind affections ; to the warm greetings of parental, or filial, or conjugal tenderness ; to the bright scenes of their childhood, and even of their riper years, when every thing around them smiled, and the oppressor's hand was not lifted to crush them. I can imagine that they have been dwelling on the sad contrast between their earlier and later days ; that they have been calling up in melancholy succession the scenes of agony and horror through which they have passed, and have thought how, after all their sacrifices and sufferings, the light of freedom has gone out in their beloved land, and a darkness that can be felt—the darkness of an iron despotism, has settled over it. I can suppose that the endeared name of wife, or mother, or daughter, has darted before their eyes written in characters of

blood; that they have thought of the pang which accompanied the last look before the final separation; and that their hearts have been ready to overflow when they have remembered the playfulness and the loveliness of their own little ones, who once hung upon their knees as your children do upon yours, but who have been butchered before their eyes, or driven into perpetual exile. Yes, my friends, these men carry about with them in their memories a record of woes that would appal any of us; and surely we will not pity them the less, we will not pray for them the less, we will not help them the less, because, being strangers on our shores, they are unable to tell us the story of their sufferings.

Brethren and friends, have not these unfortunate men already found a place in your generous sympathies, in your charitable regards? I should wrong you to suppose that the brief story of their sufferings to which you have listened, had left you unmoved; or that it is in your heart to see them in the midst of you, and especially in the sanctuary, where you come to acknowledge yourselves debtors for every thing, and yet say to them, in the spirit of a heartless and infidel philosophy, "Depart in peace." No, my friends, you will do no such thing. You will show by your offerings, and by the spirit which dictates them, that a generous heart, a sympathizing heart,—may I not say in respect to many of you—a *christian* heart, is beating in your bosom. But before you deposit your gifts, let me remind you that the individuals for whom your charity is

solicited, are the countrymen of the illustrious Kosciusko and Pulaski, whose names shine out so brightly in the history of our revolution; who stood up with our fathers to fight the battles that secured our independence, and one of whom offered himself up on the field, a martyr to American liberty. Remember too, that you are the children of those who embarked their fortunes and their lives in a bloody conflict for freedom; and that if Heaven had not been propitious in giving them the victory, you might yourselves have been the sons of slaves, groaning under the hand of oppression, or perhaps flying to the ends of the earth for an asylum. Remember also, that though you live in a free country, you live in a mutable world; and the day *may* come when even the grave of *American* liberty shall be dug; and this land shall drink the blood of its own inhabitants; and the glory of our republican institutions shall be trampled in the dust; and you or your children be chained to a despot's car, and grace a despot's triumph. I do not *predict* such an event; and I pray the God of all goodness, who has been the protector of our nation's liberties hitherto, that it may never occur; but when I see how the spirit of revolution is abroad among the nations, and especially when I open my ear to the din of party strife which is raging on every side, I dare not say that these clouds which flit about here and there in our political atmosphere, may not, by some fearful principle of attraction, be drawn together, and concentrate in terrific blackness their angry elements, and burst upon this land in a wild storm,



which shall uproot the tree of liberty which was planted at the expense of the blood of our fathers, and which had begun to yield fruit for the healing of other nations. I say again, may the merciful God avert from us this doom; but if it *should* be so, and the night-clouds of an ignoble bondage should come over this land, and you should be driven from your wives, and daughters, and mothers, into a foreign country, and should land upon the shores of another nation in all the depths of poverty and woe, and should be unable to tell the story of your own wrongs, say what would be so grateful to you, what would help so much to abate the anguish of recollection, as to be greeted by the spirit of christian philanthropy; to see the stranger stepping forth to give you a brother's hand? Put thy soul then, O man, in *his* soul's stead; and by the tide of sorrowful recollection which would then press upon thee, and by the painful embarrassments which would cluster about thee,—resolve, with thine ear open to the voice of conscience, and thine eye open upon the retributions of eternity,—resolve how this appeal in behalf of thine exiled, suffering brother, shall be answered.

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